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ESTIMATES UPGRADED

North Korea Has Ground Unit Edge

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WASHINGTON — U.S. intelligence analysts say they have found a major flaw in earlier estimates of North Korean ground troop strength that gives the north a clear ground superiority over South Korea.

The new estimates of North Korean strength, which specialists say are reliable, present U.S. leaders with a major dilemma: how to continue to withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea in the face of new information that shows the balance of military might on the Korean peninsula has tipped — perhaps decisively — in favor of North Korea.

The new estimates, said to have been prepared by several dozen Army experts on North Korea, credit North Korea with at least 40 divisions and brigades. Earlier estimates placed the North Korean ground troop strength at fewer than 30 divisions and brigades. South Korea is said to have 21 divisions.

The new estimates also credit North Korea with about 600 maneuver battalions, more than double the South Korean total. This new North Korean ground force estimate means, in the view of these experts, that the north has the ability to tie up South Korean units stationed near the demilitarized zone and still have enough manpower remaining to launch major attacks on Seoul from other directions.

According to authoritative sources, the new estimates have been presented to key congressional committees in secret sessions. The Secret Select Committee on Intelligence was one of the panels briefed. Other sources said that the new estimates have been confirmed by the Central Intelligence Agency.

The new estimates are said to be based on three independent sources — reports by agents, satellite photographs and communications interceptions and other signal intelligence. The in-depth study of the North Korean ground force may have been sparked by the discovery, through signal intelligence, of a previously unknown North Korean unit near Pyongyang.

The U.S. experts on North Korea examined satellite photo intelligence from the early 1970s to the present. Agent reports were examined back to the mid-1960s. The study of signal intelligence data went from the present back to the time of the Korean War, sources said.

Whether South Korea has been informed of the new estimates is uncertain, but in the opinion of some sources the Seoul government has not been told of the findings. There have been unconfirmed reports that certain elements within the Defense Department want to "keep the lid on" the new estimates, possibly to prevent serious questions being raised about the U.S. plans to withdraw the 2d Inf Div and most other Army troops from South Korea during the next few years.

Another possible concern is the South Korean reaction. South Korea does not have nuclear weapons, but it is known that its scientists have worked on the development of nuclear weapons. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that another concern facing U.S. policymakers is whether South Korea may decide to resume such work.